



News Release

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Neural Tube Birth Defects Cut in Half in Utah

Survey shows 48% of Utah Women Taking Folic Acid

(Salt Lake City, UT) – Neural tube defects (birth defects affecting the brain and spine) have declined by more than 50 percent in Utah since 1992, according to a recent study by the Utah Department of Health's (UDOH) Birth Defect Network (UBDN). The UDOH attributes the decline to more women taking folic acid supplements before pregnancy, ongoing public education programs and the addition of folic acid to food products.

In 1992, nearly 12 of every 10,000 Utah babies were born with a neural tube defect (NTD). The rate dropped to 5.2 in 2003 meaning about 30-35 babies are healthy who otherwise may have been born with a serious NTD such as anencephaly and spina bifida. "This is another great example of Utah's public health accomplishments," says Dr. David Sundwall, Executive Director, UDOH. "Sometimes simple, inexpensive measures yield great results, such as taking a multivitamin with folic acid to help prevent birth defects."

Since 1992, repeated studies have shown that, if taken before and during early pregnancy, folic acid can prevent at least 50 percent of NTDs. Folic acid is a B-vitamin necessary for proper cell growth to prevent such defects. UDOH encourages every woman of childbearing age, even if she is not planning on becoming pregnant, to supplement her diet with 400 micrograms of folic acid each day.

According to a statewide UDOH survey from 1999 to 2003, 48 percent of women of childbearing age were taking a folic acid supplement daily (usually in form of a multivitamin). This is better than the national figure of 32 percent, estimated by a recent March of Dimes survey. "Efforts from the UBDN and its partners appear to be paying off in healthier babies," says Marcia Feldkamp, Director, UBDN, UDOH, "but we need to stay focused on our goal to have all women and their babies reap the benefits of folic acid."

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Educating women and health care providers about the benefits of daily folic acid has been a consistent focus of the UBDN since 1995. Other UDOH programs as well as the March of Dimes nationally and locally have supported UBDN's education and promotion activities. The Baby Your Baby program aired folic acid television and radio spots frequently over several years. The UBDN received financial support from the March of Dimes to purchase and distribute 25,000 bottles of multivitamins with folic acid to mothers in the WIC (Women, Infant and Children) nutrition program. The WIC vitamin project provided one-on-one folic acid education from 2000 to 2003.

UDOH also encourages health care providers to promote folic acid. According to the UBDN, most NTD affected pregnancies in recent years occurred in women after their first pregnancy. "It is crucial that health care providers talk to women about taking folic acid daily before pregnancy," says John Carey, M.D., professor of pediatrics and medical genetics expert at the University of Utah School of Medicine. "Neural tube defects develop very early in pregnancy, before many women know they are pregnant."

"Even though it is difficult to show that the decrease is entirely due to folic acid, we are certain that it has played a major role because of the timing of the reduction with the increasing rates of folic acid use," says Amy Nance, Project Coordinator, UBDN, UDOH.

Beginning in 1998, flour used for breads, cereals, pastas, rice and other grain products in the U.S. has been enriched with a small amount of folic acid. Studies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now show that this addition provides some benefit to the population, but to get enough folic acid every day, all women of childbearing age should eat a healthy diet and take a daily multivitamin containing folic acid.

For more information about birth defects or folic acid, visit health.utah.gov/birthdefect or call 1-866-818-7096.

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